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Fruit of the Motherland is an engaging, well-written, and conscientious monograph adding to the rich corpus of Massim ethnography. Focusing on the question of the possibility of gender equality on the island of Vanatinai, more generally known as Sudest Island in the Louisiade Archipelago of Papua New Guinea, it adds another detailed description of another island society in an ethnographic area that has acted as the crucible for some of the fundamental questions posed by the discipline.

It is not surprising that the work of Bronislaw Malinowski should figure prominently in the more recent ethnographies of the area. What is striking about Lepowsky's book is that unlike Weiner (1976), for example, who uses bits of Malinowskian text as a foil in the presentation of specific aspects of cultural life, this author self-consciously emulates the style of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. She does so in the face of the critical questions raised in her preface, having to do with ethnographic authority and positioned subjectivity (p. xiii). Her judicious deployment throughout the text of objectified description, narrative, anecdote, and so on is in many instances as delightful and satisfying as that found in *Argonauts*.

Again self-consciously, she opts for the use of the "arrival narrative" to launch the reader into this documentation of her experience with the people of Vanatinai. Readers of Lepowsky's chapter 1 find themselves in a boat, with the same sense of adventure as in the first chapters of *Argonauts*, setting out into the island system, picking up bits of gossip about sorcery and theft, studying the passing shoreline. The reader feels the same trepidation when the author wonders "whether or not I had made the right decision in choosing to make the island my home for a year or more" (p. 1) as in reading

Malinowski's chilling "Imagine yourself suddenly set down . . ." (1922:4). One wonders though whether this invocation of the authority of style, "an old fashioned, Malinowskian tradition" (p. xiii), is adequate to answer the kinds of fundamental theoretical questions posed in the works of Rosaldo (1989) and Clifford (1983) cited in the preface.

Although I found the ethnographic description of Vanatinai customs and practices valuable in themselves and the author's narratives of interaction with the community insightful, much of the tone of the text seems to harken back to another era and another discourse. Some years ago Marilyn Strathern wondered what conditions would be necessary to allow for the cultural construction of the "gender neutral person" (1987). This question, phrased in the feminist-inspired rhetoric of personhood and agency, was formulated after two decades or more of intense and consistent documentation of gender opposition, complementarity, dichotomy, and hierarchy in Melanesia, much of it drawn from the New Guinea Highlands. To look for the unmarked, to look for the possibility of parity was a welcome relief from the all-pervasive dichotomy and followed upon the exhaustion of the terms of discussion dictated by the concept of sexual antagonism.

According to Lepowsky, the gender-neutral person exists under conditions of low population density and interisland ritual trade. She documents the ability of women to act independently in the area of interisland ritual exchange, to inherit and control land, and to act autonomously in personal relations. She provides evidence of the absence of mythic and ideological denigration of women and the control on the part of women of esoteric and powerful knowledge. At several points Lepowsky discusses the relationship of matrilineal and matrilocal configurations to the relative autonomy of women as social actors. The discussion of coastal matrilineal societies in Melanesia suggests the need for further comparative work, as does the differential configuration of women's ritual exchange activities in the Massim in relation to those of men.

The discussion of social agency of individuals unmarked by gender distinctions and valuations is deployed within a larger argument that attempts to represent Vanatinai society as an egalitarian society. Although initially, in the preface, the goal is to present evidence in support of gender equality, by the end of the book the argument surpasses this restriction, and in the final chapter Lepowsky is arguing that Vanatinai society itself is egalitarian.

There are several threads of argument addressing the gender-equality issue that flow through most of the chapters. These arguments depend on rather transparent devices: the generalization of the discussion from the particular case to the whole of human experience, as in making the link be-

tween low population density and social egalitarianism (p. 38); and the assertion that lack of gender marking in a particular context is an indication of egalitarian gender relations, as in the “fact that old woman as well as old man are terms of respect and not of insult on Vanatinai is another marker of its egalitarian gender relations” (p. 119). These devices are not always convincing, not necessarily because of logical inconsistency. Rather, the points made have a somewhat hollow ring. I suspect this is due to the fact that they are set in a discourse that literally ran its course some time ago. Lepowsky refers repeatedly to classic works like Schlegel’s *Male Dominance and Female Autonomy* (1972) and Ortner’s “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” (1974). I am not suggesting that these works have no further value and have no place in current writing. But there is a sense in which Lepowsky pays lip service to the concerns of the 1990s by the odd reference to writings that have set the tone of current debate (for example, Clifford and Rosaldo in the preface, Appadurai 1990 and 1991 in the concluding chapter). In the preface she assures the reader, “I no longer believe it possible to describe ‘the [single and invariant] status of women’ in any society” (p. 12), and then proceeds to argue for Vanatinai as an example of a society of gender equality.

Lepowsky’s major fieldwork took place from 1977 to 1979. She returned for briefer periods in 1981 and 1987. Conceivably this representation of Vanatinai culture is based on data collected over this ten-year period. If, as we are led to believe, this decade saw little social change on Vanatinai this cannot be said of the concerns of the discipline. The ability to integrate data collected initially under the “status of women” paradigm with a current belief in the impossibility of describing a single and invariant status of women in any society is indeed a challenge.

Malinowski’s style of representing Trobriand society in his initial ethnography is indeed worthy of emulation for its range of rhetorical modes, its detail, its thoroughness. What it does lack is self-awareness, especially in terms of the limitations of the concepts deployed, which themselves are cultural artifacts with a life course of their own. Lepowsky shows little appreciation of the life histories of the concepts of gender equality and the gender-neutral person. She uses the terms interchangeably. This equation of the two leads to a further conflation of social equality itself in the final chapter, with value placed on personal autonomy and the ethic of individualism. At one point she describes Vanatinai society as “an equal opportunity society” (p. 287). It is just such confounding of analytic structures and subjective ideology that critics of traditional ethnography write against.

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